

## **More About "The Elusive G": A Biographical Note on Edwin Conway Griffith**

**By James L. Murphy**

Mary Ellen and Bob Seery have documented the exciting discovery of several rare pieces of Cincinnati's Coultry Pottery and have identified the artist "G" as Edwin Griffith (Seery and Seery 2006); but the story does not end quite there. Although the Seerys ask, "who was Edwin Griffith?" finding an 1881 reference to his teaching china painting at the corner of Fifth and Race streets, (Perry 1881), they end their search, having "checked all available sources."

There is considerably more information available about this artist, however. The 1877 (ending June 1878) Cincinnati city directory, for example, lists Griffith and Howe (Edwin C.G. and Frank H.H.) Decorators of china, porcelain, tile, &c, s.w.c. 5th & Race, and that middle initial "C" in Edwin C. Griffith is as important as his signature "G," for it allows us to identify him in the 1870 federal census. At that time he lived in Springfield, Ohio, aged 16, with widowed mother Kate, along with elder brother Olmsted, aged 18; a younger brother Charles; and sisters Georgiana, Jennie, and Ida. Edwin C. is listed as a "journ Painter," no doubt studying under Olmsted, who is listed as "artist."

Other census records show the family living in Dayton, Ohio, in 1860, and in Wayne County, Indiana, in 1850: Collins W. and Kate, with 1-year-old son Armstead H. Griffith, born in Indiana. (The transmogrification of Armstead to Olmstead and later to Armin is the kind of blunder in early census records that turns genealogists' hair gray.)



Moving forward in time to 1880, still in Springfield, Ohio, is widowed Kate Griffith, aged 49, keeping house, along with son "Armin H.," 28, artist, Georgiana, Jennie L., and Ida. But where is Edwin C. Griffith? He has not been located in the 1880 census, and the next glimpse of him we find is in 1894, when "E.C. Griffith" was a resident of Los Angeles, California (Hughes II, 223.)

Researching Edward C. Griffith's elder brother makes things somewhat clearer. Armond Harold Griffith is included in the *National Cyclopaedia of American Biography* (15: 404), which provides some valuable information. According to this source, Armond was born at Knightstown, Indiana, June 11, 1860, son of Collins William (1825-1869) and Katherine (Conway) Griffith, which tallies well

with the 1850 and 1860 census data, the latter showing 8-year-old Edwin (born in Indiana), with Charles, and Georgiana also added to the family. As an adult, Armond H. Griffith became secretary and director of what was then (1891) the Detroit Art Museum, retaining that post until his abrupt resignation in 1913 (for reasons considered "unprintable" at the time) when he moved to California. Hughes gives his birth date as June 10, 1849 (Ohio) and his death date as September 23, 1930, in Santa Barbara, California, where he had settled in 1913. At some point he was joined by his maiden sisters, Georgiana and Genevieve, who are both listed with him in the 1920 census.

So, except for the question of where he was in 1880, the mystery of Edwin C. Griffith is actually pretty simple. At some point he dropped his first name and went by his middle name, Conway (his mother's maiden name). The sketch of Conway Griffith in Hughes (II, 223) incorrectly states that he was born in Springfield, Ohio, June 10, 1863—he was actually born in Indiana, like his elder brother, ca. 1853. For several years, again according to Hughes, he was on the faculty at the Cincinnati School of Design, where he taught china painting. For health reasons, Edwin C. went West in the 1890s, being active in Denver, where he studied landscape painting. After trips to Mexico and California in 1898, he settled permanently at Laguna Beach, where he died April 28, 1924. According to his obituary in the next day's *Los Angeles Times*, Conway Griffith had lived in California for thirty years and the last 21 years at Laguna Beach, where he had founded the artists' colony, something of an exaggeration according to Laguna Beach Art Museum curator Janet Blake, who clarifies that Conway Griffith was one of the founding members.

The most authoritative source available, the entries for Armand and Edwin Conway Griffith in Haverstock (2000) contains additional interesting information, placing Conway Griffith in Cleveland, Ohio from 1878 (although the earliest documentation I find is his entry in the 1879-1880 Cleveland directory) to 1880 and stating that his visit to Mexico was made as the agent of a New York jeweler. Haverstock cites a notice in the April 28, 1880, *Cleveland Plain Dealer* that reports "Mr. E.H. [sic] Griffith's painting class will have its work on free exhibition at no. 33 ½ Euclid Avenue on Tuesday evening of next week," and his presence in Cleveland is confirmed by the 1879 and 1880 city directories, the former listing "E. Conway Griffith teacher painting, 358 Euclid Avenue, bds Forest City House," the latter listing him as "artist," suggesting perhaps that he was unable to sustain a painting class. His absence from the 1880 census, conducted in June of that year, may mean that he had left Cleveland by that time or it may be simply due to the fact that the census taker included only employees of the Forest City House and not the tenants. He is absent from the 1881-82 Cleveland directory.

## Acknowledgements

The photograph of Conway Griffith at Laguna Beach was kindly provided by Janet Blake, curator of the Laguna Art Museum.

## References

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